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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses questions raised about the validity of facilitated communication with autistic individuals and others having severe disabilities and offers examples from the authors' program to support the validity of facilitated communication. Published studies showing a high rate of unfounded claims of abuse under facilitated communication as well as undue influence by the facilitator are critiqued. A lack of studies of facilitated communication in natural settings is noted. Examples are given of individuals who, with the aid of facilitated communication, communicated information the facilitator could not have known. A current study comparing communication about weekend happenings with later parental reports notes a 66 percent rate of accuracy by students using facilitated communication (compared to 100 percent accuracy by verbal peers). While more research in natural settings is encouraged, schools are urged not to eliminate the only means of communicating these students have. (DB)

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FACILITATED COMMUNICATION: PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS AND VALIDATIONS IN MULTIPLE ENVIRONMENTS

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Most people, by now, have heard of facilitated communication (FC) thanks to programs such as *PrimeTime* and *Sixty Minutes*. FC is a method where an individual, called a facilitator, provides tactile feedback to the person with autism, call the facilitated communicator (FCR). This feedback seems to allow the FCR the motor control necessary to communicate by pointing to pictures, words, a keyboard, etc. The tactile feedback can be provided in several different ways. The facilitator's hand is usually in contact with one of the following body parts of the FCR: hand; wrist; forearm; elbow; shoulder; or even hand touching shirt.

The tactile feedback is a means of support for the FCR, by holding the FCR's arm and providing resistance against the forward push toward the augmentative communication device (ACD). **UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD A FACILITATOR EVER GUIDE THE FCR'S HAND TOWARD THE ACD.** The FCR's trust in the ability and confidence of the facilitator also seems a key factor for success. It appears that if the FCR does not believe in the facilitator, purposeful communication will not happen.

The ultimate goal of facilitation is to help the FCRs develop those pointing skills and motor control so that they can communicate independently. This is done over a period of time, where the facilitator continues to "fade" support further and further back from the hand until, hopefully, support is not needed at all.

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It is due to the FCR's reliance on the facilitator that there is a great deal of controversy about the validity of FC. The first question regarding facilitation, that these authors heard, dealt with the number of unfounded claims of abuse raised by FCRs. Educational professionals and attorneys alike would talk about the 80 to 90 percent rate of "false" claims. No one ever bothered, however, to compare that rate to the number of "false" or unfounded claims of abuse made in the similar VERBAL population! Without that comparative number, this percentage cannot be considered important or even informative regarding the validity of facilitation.

Many published articles have found that facilitated communications are influenced by the facilitator, although not done purposely. These studies almost always involve "testing" the FCR and the facilitator in an evaluation process, such as a Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test or answering questions about a given story. These studies have found that the FCR scores better when the facilitator knows what is being asked of the FCR. The published studies, to date, have not attempted to validate FC in a natural setting.

Studies such as these do little to explain the many instances of FCRs typing accurate information that the facilitator could not know. Also, there is not as much publicity for the positive experiences surrounding FC, such as the fact that there are individuals, who began facilitating with hand-over-hand, now communicating via independent pointing.

There are many different ways to validate facilitated communications naturally. The easiest way is to document instances where the FCR relates information that the facilitator could not have known about previous to that communication. We have documented numerous valid communications in our program. Two such examples are:

1) During an auditory integration training session, where the student was required to sit quietly and listen to music through headphones, the student would not sit still and kept taking the headphones off. When the student returned to the classroom and was questioned as to why she did not behave, the student communicated via facilitation "no

music". We then discovered that the headphones did not work for that session and the student was correct -- there was no music!

2) Another student was not behaving on a separate occasion and when asked if there was a problem, the student eventually facilitated that she was feeling pain in a particular area of her body. This information was relayed to the student's mother who took her to the doctor. Upon examination, the student was suffering from an infection in the area she had indicated during facilitation!

Facilitated communication has also been validated during the annual hearing tests done on all the students in our program. For the first time, our FCRs were able to take the hearing test. The audiometer was set up so that neither the FCR nor the facilitator could see when a tone was introduced. The tester made minimal movements to present the tones and duplicated those movements, as best as possible, even when a tone was not presented. The FCR was asked whether or not beeping was heard and had to point to yes or no. The question asked was always the same, whether a tone was produced or not, and the same person presented the tones for all the FCRs being tested. Ten students took their hearing test with facilitated responses. Eight of the ten responded accurately to the question of whether or not there was a tone 80 percent of the time. The other two students gave inconsistent responses.

Two classrooms of facilitating students are currently taking part in a naturally occurring validation study. The data is collected during an academic period of the students' day. The students are writing journals dealing with their activities during the weekend. The teacher sends home a letter on Friday, asking the parent or guardian to write back about what the student did over the weekend. The parent is encouraged to discuss this information with the student, to minimize the chance of an error being due to memory lapse on the student's part. When the note is sent back to school on Monday, it is collected and held by one staff member, who will not be facilitating. None of the staff doing the facilitation with the students are allowed to see the information before the class.

The students' responses are recorded in a story form in the front of the room, and the teacher then checks the accuracy. If a parent does not send back the home note, or the student types something not included in the home note, a follow-up note is sent to the parents to see if the information provided by the student is accurate. This is done for the non-verbal AND verbal students in the room. Answers that cannot be confirmed one way or the other are not included in the data.

Journal entries were conducted for approximately one month before data was collected. This was to make sure the students were familiar with the task and that it felt like part of the normal routine.

Results of the initial study involving eighteen students, over a period of four weeks, is as follows:

a) the FCRs have been accurate 66% of the time

b) their verbal peers have been accurate 100% of the time.

Another validation study is being conducted during another regular class period during the week, cooking. Again, the activity of collecting information was done for approximately one month before a session was used for validation purposes. The staff member who will be doing the facilitating leaves the room while the students put together a recipe. Each student either puts an ingredient into the mixture, or performs a task such as stirring. Once the recipe is completed, the lesson leader reviews what each student did, again to assure that wrong information is not due to memory problems. The staff member returns and facilitates with the students to find out what their part was in making the recipe. This is done while writing a group story about the project. The results obtained to date on the five nonverbal and four verbal students is as follows:

a) the FCRs have responded with 60% accuracy

b) the verbal students have responded with 75% accuracy.

The results of these studies indicate that more investigation is needed, and that the investigation needs to be in the natural environment. If we do not continue with

facilitation, those students who may become independent communicators, after prolonged facilitation practice, will never have that opportunity.

Some observations made of the students since FC was introduced cannot be ignored. They include the fact that nonverbal students who were previously permitted to be uninvolved are not expected to be involved. Also, nonverbal students who were difficult to engage previously, **do** sit and allow themselves to be helped for facilitation. Until more information is known, it would seem unfair to remove the only means these students have of communicating with us in a way we can understand.